

## "He Didn't Say Goodbye"

Suicide Prevention Month launches yearlong efforts to encourage Sailors to seek help

By Terrina Weatherspoon, Defense Media Activity

"Suicide prevention is an all hands effort. We may never know how many lives are saved through your everyday efforts, but we do know that a single life lost is one too many."

-MCPON Mike Stevens

I got a phone call Dec. 7, 2011 from the school," said Chief Petty Officer Rita Powell. "They told me my son might possibly have a 'people to kill' list in his bedroom. When I found the list my name was first, then my husband's name, then his older sister's name third. There were 14 other names on that list as well; kids from school. When confronted, he denied the list and then went into a fit of anger and began screaming about how much he hated his life. We immediately took him to the ER and he was admitted for the first time to a mental health facility."

Powell's son was admitted two more times after evidence suggested he was cutting himself and had thought about killing himself. He has been seeing a therapist twice a week since being discharged.

"I miss my little boy that was all smiles and had a great heart," said Powell. "We don't talk much at all. We coexist in the house. He stays very separated from what the rest of the family is doing."

September is Navy Suicide Prevention Month and the start of year-long efforts to encourage service members to reach out. Whether you know someone who has committed or threatened suicide, or whether you have contemplated it for yourself, the Navy is promoting efforts to build resilience and unit cohesion,

navigate stress, and promote a culture supportive of seeking help as a sign of strength.

"The theme of this year is ... Thrive in Your Community," said Rear Adm. Sean Buck, director, Twenty-First Century Sailor office. "What we are trying to do is promote a feeling of cohesion, a feeling of family, and community to make sure Sailors don't feel like they need to go this alone."

"My command has been a great support," said Powell. "And I'm glad the Navy is taking this seriously. I was afraid to ask my son outright if he was considering killing himself because I didn't want to put any ideas in his head or make him feel that by me asking the question, I wanted him dead. Training should be tailored to an environment that people, such as myself who have been through it, can talk to it and ensure Sailors know, understand, and can be comfortable asking the hard question, 'are you thinking about killing yourself?'"

"Since I've been in the Navy I've lost three friends to suicide; one Navy, one Marine and one Army," said Chief Petty Officer Laura James. "I almost lost [a friend] earlier this year but made the call that had my friend admitted as an inpatient. Substance abuse, downward spiral, severe depression. I was getting vague hints, so finally I flat out asked, got her location and called the police."

The Defense Suicide Prevention Office is working together with the Department of Veterans Affairs to encourage service member, veterans and their families to contact the Military/Veterans Crisis Line. They can obtain confidential, crisis support 24/7 at MCL/VCL by calling 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1), going online to [www.militarycrisisline.net](http://www.militarycrisisline.net) and texting by phone at 838255.

"Everything happened to me at once," said Petty Officer 1st Class Joyce Ledge. "I lost my father, my job and my home. My father was the only unconditional love I had ever known. I was in despair. I was broken for the first time in my life. I couldn't remember a goal, a dream, or a desire. Even worse, I had a daughter who



needed me, and I just could not find the strength to be there for her. My XO picked up that there was something going on with me,” continued Ledge. “I was able to tell him how I was feeling and he genuinely showed interest. Many knew my father had died, and they all saw me crying, but he was the only one to ask me if I needed to talk. That’s all I needed that day; someone to ask me how I was doing and really listen for the answer.”

“All of the stress that we may come across in our daily lives or in our professional lives in the Navy, if you don’t feel as though you have someone to turn to, or you’re not part of a team, it may cause you to lose hope quicker than not,” said Buck. “So we are trying to provide that feeling of team, that feeling of family, and encourage a sailor to seek help.”

Not all Sailors are comfortable reaching out to their chains of command. However, there are many other options. Sailors are encouraged to reach out to someone, anyone; that includes friends, family, health care professionals, and regardless of religious affiliation or faith preference, Navy Chaplains are a confidential source of help as well.

“I had a Sailor of mine text at almost midnight with suicidal comments,” said Chief Jennifer Brown. “He was fairly new and I didn’t program his name into my cell, but he listened to me when I told him to contact me if he needed to talk. He wouldn’t tell me where he was, so I called 911 and tried to trace his location. I was not stopping until I found him and got him help. Thankfully we found him. I can’t imagine what would have happened if I had blown off that text, or not taken him seriously. He reached out to me, and that was a cry for help.”

The message that seeking help is a sign of strength has resonated from the top down throughout the Defense Department, said Jacqueline Garrick the Pentagon official in charge of the suicide prevention effort, noting that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have sent that message repeatedly.

“Right now a big strategic change that we have in the military and in our Navy right now is to be sure that a sailor knows that seeking help is actually a sign of strength,” said Buck. “It takes courage to seek help. It is part of our Navy’s core values of honor, courage and commitment and Sailors need to be sure that if they do have the courage to seek help, they know they are part of a team and have teammates or shipmates that will help them.”

“I didn’t even know details about what led to his demise,” said

Chief Joshua Bright. “That’s part of the guilt I feel all the time, especially once I had been selected for Chief. He always told me he would be here for that. I hadn’t talked to him for several months because he was on deployment. Then I heard he was returning early and the details were sketchy. I was transferring, so I didn’t call him. The first few weeks I was at my new duty station, were his last few weeks on this earth. I had this feeling that I needed to call him, but I never did. Then I got the call that they found him in the barracks. He never reached out. He was so busy taking care of everyone else. He was a caring father to three girls and an amazing chief who always had the answers – until that moment.”

Suicide leaves so many unanswered questions and feelings of hopelessness with those left behind.

“He didn’t leave a note. He didn’t say goodbye,” said Petty Officer Alexandra Snyder. “His younger sister found him hanging in the bathroom of their upscale home,” said Snyder, who got the call that her friend, a member of the Air Force, had killed himself. “People who commit suicide have to be in a place so dark they can’t see a way out, but what they don’t realize is their pain won’t end with their death; it will transfer to their parents, siblings, friends and everyone they love.”

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Spotlighting this problem during September is only the first step, said Buck.

Throughout the year Sailors will continue to see literature, blogs, command activities and outreach by leadership to constantly and consistently refocus the Fleet on this epidemic and keep commands from getting the phone call nobody wants to receive.

“I don’t have many words for it,” said Senior Chief Wendy Hooks-Kramer. “I got the call that he was dead; his family asked me to escort his body home. I flew from San Diego to Dover, I never saw his body. All I got was a metal casket and a dog tag. He hung himself, and because it was overseas he was not embalmed in time. The HMC there said it was best for me not to see the body.

He was my shipmate and friend for 12 years. I figured I would meet his parents at some point, but not like this. They were wonderful but heartbroken.”

As with sexual assault, suicide has an everlasting effect that never completely dissolves with time.

“My dad committed suicide,” said Seaman Emily Coler. “I remember the moment clear as day. I rushed home from my friend’s house because my mother had something to tell me. I knew it wasn’t good. When she told me, I crumbled to the ground. I was in shock. That was almost eight years ago and I still feel guilt wondering if there was something I could have done; knowing that it probably wouldn’t have made a difference. It hurts to know he won’t be here for so many things in my life. He didn’t see me graduate or get married. He won’t get to hear my kids call him grandpa. The situation has made me more sensitive to struggle an in general. For example, when people put a finger to their head and pretend to blow their brains out, thinking it is funny, I just stare at them, because it’s not. I don’t joke like that or talk about things like that in a light way.”

The Navy recognizes that there is a need for more education when it comes to suicide prevention and they are encouraging Front-line leaders at all levels to embrace this issue and take measures to create a command climate that encourages Service members to seek the help they need without the stigma that it will negatively impact their careers.

“One boy on my ship had killed himself by jumping out of a five story hotel room,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Alexandra Arroyo. “He had a girlfriend who had a child by another man. He was in love with her. He drank himself silly and then just jumped. I had seen him a few days before and could sense something was wrong. I asked him if he was okay. He smiled and assured me he was alright. I didn’t question him further because most people on the ship were always somewhat sad in ways I couldn’t really read into. That’s why I always try to smile. You never know when someone just needs to see a little bit of kindness. I had a friend reach out to me when he felt like he was going to commit suicide. I took him to medical. I ended up sitting with him and reading to him. He was really a mess, but he thanks me to this day for just being there for him.”



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Sailors can contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 or [www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)